

Mannish Boys by [LunalitSol](#)

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Genre: Bisexual Jonathan Byers, Bisexual Steve Harrington, Cussing, Discussions of Past Trauma, Discussions of mental illness, Future Fic, Hopper is relevant to the story but not really a focus, Kind of aged up, M/M, Multi, Period Typical Attitudes, Search For Identity, Semi Slow Burn, Spoilers for Stranger Things 2, Toxic Masculinity, Will add additional warnings if and when they apply, Work In Progress, post adolescence

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Characters: Dustin Henderson, Jane "El" Hopper, Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Steve Harrington, Vanessa Valdez, Will Byers

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Summary:

Two-ish years had passed since the Mind Flayer was banished back to the Upside Down, taking all its demohellions with it. Things were surprisingly close to good, outside of the increasingly shitty sleep, the fact that Jonathan Byers was basically his best friend even all the way from New York, and the suspicion that he was somehow being left out of the loop by the kids. Despite all that, it seemed like things were almost coming together for all of them.

By now? Steve really should have known better.

Mannish Boys

Hawkins, Indiana

May 9th, 1986

Approx. 1½ years after the closing of the gate

& the expulsion of The Mind Flayer

Mannish Boys

PROLOGUE

Steve hadn't originally planned on going to the graduation.

Honestly? It was kind of a minefield. He'd gotten some level of accustomed to playing it political with the townsfolk and some of his old friends now that he was a full-fledged adult and all that (although Tommy and Carol could still go fuck themselves with a nail-covered baseball bat, frankly), but there was something hard to swallow about watching his ex-girlfriend graduate high-school with Jonathan Byers at her side.

Of all the guys in that high school, Byers? Really?

It wasn't like Steve was jealous anymore or even angry. Just... well, it kind of sucked.

He should have been suspicious when Mike, of all the kids, called him in.

Dustin phoned Steve what should probably have been an embarrassing amount, and any time he saw the other kids around

they were at least pretty friendly- for shithead teens, anyway. Mike, though, could hold a grudge as well as anyone Steve had ever met, and seemed to have decided that with his sister and Steve Harrington broken up, Steve was the perfect target for his pent up adolescent hostility.

The one time Steve had tried to ask Dustin what he could do to make Mike cool off, the kid had blustered something about sibling protection and then about how that one time when Steve was concussed to shit he'd apparently mistaken Mike for Nancy. Needless to say, Steve dropped it the way he did any time his ex came up as a subject of conversation, and had pretty much washed his hands of caring what either of the Wheeler siblings thought about him.

Still, when one of the little nerds called Steve, he came. He just didn't think twice anymore.

He'd come for the meltdowns of first breakups; the group tutoring sessions for "Jane"; the weird drama of the little Byers being outed to the party as maybekindofcompletely gay; the even more dramatic intervention for Dustin when he'd gone too far off the deep end with his first girlfriend; and even for the total insanity of the Jerkass Billy April Fools Payback Extravaganza, or J.B. AFPE (the name came courtesy of Lucas, the acronym Dustin, of course), last month.

So, when Mike Wheeler called and said, "We need to talk. Meet us in my basement in thirty minutes. You don't have anything better you're doing so get here. Thirty minutes, Harrington," Steve didn't think. He just grabbed his bat, threw on his pre-packed backpack and a jacket, and he went.

He should probably have thought about it.

When he'd gotten down into the Wheelers' basement his first clue that it was a trap was Will.

The kid was between Mike and El and as soon as their eyes connected Will's widened and he hunched down so that he looked even shimpier than usual, his gaze shifting to stare determinedly down at his shoes with a subtlety level approaching what Steve would call nonexistent.

Then, Mike jammed an elbow pretty hard into Will's side, which was Steve's second clue because while Mike never seemed to have qualms about physically making a point, he also was always really careful when it came to that kid.

It was as soon as Steve felt his eyebrows starting to draw together and the alarms started going off in the back of his brain that the door to the basement audibly locked, and Steve tripped down the last few steps like his feet had a mind of their own. Or like a certain psychic girl was using her powers on him.

That was his third clue.

"What do you shitheads want? Do you need a ride somewhere? You are not going down into another hole, you know that? It's not happening."

"Oh can it, asshole," Max had rolled her eyes at him. "I'm a better driver than you anyways."

"Uh, no you're not. You stay far away from my car, do you hear me? You do not."

"Steve," Mike interrupted, and Steve looked at the kid.

The freshman's eyes met his, dark and steady and certain.

"You have to be there when my sister and Jonathan graduate next week."

Steve's first reaction was to laugh. His second was to point firmly at the stupid teenager and make it very clear that that was bullshit .

"You're kidding."

"No. I'm not."

They had about a fifteen-second stare down before Steve got fed up and flung around to glare at Dustin.

"You know I'm not doing it. What were you thinking going along with this? You could have warned me or something, dipshit."

Dustin's hands flew up in an echo of surrender that immediately made the pressure behind Steve's temple flare.

"I'm sorry Steve, but it was the best option we had. Before Mike called you, we talked through the different scenarios, and this was the one with the best chance of success."

"What does that even mean, Henderson? This is crap and you know it. Why the hell would I have to go?"

"It's my fault."

Steve looked back over at Will, anger caving in to confusion.

"I had... a dream, but it was like before, like seeing into the Upside Down. I just- I have a bad feeling. But I don't want to worry Jonathan, especially if it turns out to be nothing. It's... a big night for him, and he's leaving soon."

"He's leaving," Steve repeated dumbly.

"Yeah," and Will seemed to see right through him. "We've kept it quiet, but he got his acceptance letter to NYU. He qualified for some stuff and is gonna get a job and since things have been calm, we all agreed he could go. He's leaving a couple weeks after the ceremony."

Steve refocused on the kid.

He looked tired, but that was about par for the course. He was skinny and still the smallest of the boys even after shooting up over the last year. All things that weren't exactly signs of glowing health, but also nothing really new. Even so- Steve had heard and seen for himself too many times now how good the youngest Byers was at hiding.

"Things have been calm, huh?"

Will's eyes went back to his shoes, and Steve almost choked on his own fear for a second before he shoved it back down again. His stomach was clenching like he'd had sour milk.

"If it helps," Mike added, and his voice was softer now, "I think Jonathan and Nancy broke up, or they're going to at graduation."

Nancy's also moving away."

"What, they're not going to try the long distance thing, complete with dirty letters and all that jazz? Shocker."

Mike glowered at him.

"We need your help," El, or Jane sometimes, he guessed, was unwavering in both voice and stare as she interjected. "It was majority rules. That means it's like a promise. You have to."

Steve had distinctly felt the last of his reserves starting to crumble then.

These damn kids were too powerful for their own good.

"Come on Steve," Dustin chimed in, and yeah, Steve was pretty much done for.

"This is bullshit," he had said again. Then, "Fine. Screw you guys though. Seriously."

"Fuck off," Max shot back at him laughing. "You were never going to say anything other than yes, and we all know it."

Lucas nudged her, looking as though he couldn't decide if he was more worried about Steve's reaction or irritated with her inability to keep her mouth shut, and Steve had to hide a smirk at the idea that the kids were aggravating one another anywhere near as much as they were him.

They'd tossed around some battle station strategics before Steve had been allowed to leave, because it had somehow become their weirdo world that he was just sort of living in.

And then, he was home, staring at his reading homework from Hawkins Community without really seeing any of the words themselves in the yellowed white of the textbook's page; instead the black type kept becoming teeth, rows of sharpened teeth that leered out at him from a faceless maw, shooting his concentration clear to hell.

Steve fantasized sometimes about leaving Hawkins, leaving the places and people and demons behind to crumble into dusty memory until the whole of it was so moth-eaten and faded he could no longer be sure he wasn't just recalling the fragments of some bullshit story he'd had to read once. Of course, he couldn't leave this forsaken fucking town until at least all the kids did, and he knew somehow they never would; so, it was a pipe dream, and down here in the real world, he wasn't going anywhere either.

But Jonathan was?

That was strangely harder for him to wrap his mind around than any of the other shit.

His tentative friendship with Byers had been strained (to put it lightly) with all the Nancy crap, but Steve still thought and worried about the dude more than he wanted to. It was easy to visualize Nancy leaving Hawkins, but Jonathan was another thing altogether. How the fuck did that work?

Steve groaned with frustration and abandoned his textbook in favor of going through the clutter piled up on his desk until he found them—Nancy's invitation was black and white, with swirling calligraphy on the front and the careful slope of her handwriting inside.

I still believe in our friendship, Steve Harrington. Jonathan and I both really want to see you. Even if you can't attend the ceremony, our families are having a celebratory dinner at my house, and the graduation party at Vanessa's starts at nine. I miss you. Please come.

Sincerely,

Nancy K. Wheeler.

Jonathan, meanwhile, had gone a simpler route. When Steve had answered the four sharp raps to his door, Byers had pressed the compound square of lined paper folded and creased to hell into his palm, flashed him a nerve-wracked half-smile, and promptly fled,

yelling his goodbye over his shoulder even though he'd never said hello.

Jonathan's handwriting was about as mad and uneven as he was.

I'm sorry everythings bullshit. Nancy really wants us to see you when we graduate. I do too.

It was only three sentences, but Steve had read them at least five times since their delivery two weeks ago. The words had been sitting like rocks in his chest for just as long. They were so Jonathan Byers-and, like Byers, they had been proving all but impossible to shake.

So, he was going. Fine, okay, whatever. If it meant doing everything he could to stop some supernatural blowhards from ruining the graduation he was well aware both Byers and Nancy had been working their asses off for, he was there. Any of these people called, any of them needed him, and he came. No questions asked.

The graduation went off without a hitch- and then the big dinner the Wheelers had set up for their daughter and her boyfriend passed too without incident; before long, the party at Vanessa's was in full swing, and Steve was clocking the hours with reluctant anger knotting up in his gut.

Jonathan and Nancy were breaking up, but not "officially" until he left to get settled in New York the coming Friday. This meant Steve had a front row seat to the Nancy and Jonathan show and, really, he was getting ready to dig up some rotten vegetables or something to throw. All this for what? For a dream? For a weird feeling? Really, for nothing. For fucking nothing.

A voice in the back of his head that sounded a lot like Dustin's immediately struck back at his growing irritation.

What had he expected? It wasn't like he wanted another supernatural calamity, was it? Was it?

A warm hand closed around Steve's arm just above the wrist, and his head jerked up.

Jonathan cleared his throat awkwardly, fingers flexing against Steve's skin before pulling back and combing through the mop of his own hair. Steve's eyes followed the motion, a quiet climbing into him. His throat was dry when he swallowed.

As if reading his mind, Byers coughed and stuck his hands into his pockets, shoulders going up.

"What's going on?" Steve asked after a beat passed, too comfortably silent for all that should be thick and muddied between them.

Jonathan took a deep breath and then just stood with his mouth open for a second, before he seemed to switch gears and extracted a hand to gesture vaguely again.

"Come on."

He seemed to be expecting argument but Steve had none, so they only watched one another, sizing up, until Jonathan's mouth twitched into another of those half-smiles and he started moving away into the crowd. Without thinking, Steve reached for him, fingers skating the air just shy of Byers' lower back before his mind caught up with his body, and he aborted the motion.

As he followed Jonathan, he fought a wave of dark-tinted memory, flashes of the Byers' living room and Nancy and a thing on top of Jonathan, all sinister slime and sinew and that chittering sound that climbed into his spine and never really went away. Fuck, but his heart was pounding like if it went any harder it could break right through his rib cage or something.

Did he actually want those nightmares coming back into his real, concrete life?

No. 'Just more bullshit,' Nancy's voice slurred from a shadowed corner of his mind, stony and sad and sick of his shit. Of course even his brain's twisted version of her was right. In what incarnation would Nancy Wheeler ever be fucking wrong?

Steve would be completely okay if exactly zero additional supernatural threats came to Hawkins ever again. Give him apple

pies and any semblance of normalcy. Give him the kids growing up and getting to live out actual semi-normal human lives. Hell, Steve would do just about anything not to see Jonathan underneath another Demogorgon or Nancy again stuck pointing a shotgun at a flickering light with panic on her breath. He wanted these people safe.

Steve looked around the room they were in now, suspicion shooting up as the memories from the last few years receded. If he had to guess he would say based on the pastel walls and bunk beds that the room belonged to Vanessa's younger twin sisters, Isabella and Sofia, and Jonathan looked hilariously misplaced against the horse and baseball posters and the pile of decapitated barbies at his feet.

"So," Steve said only a little awkwardly as he shut the door behind himself, "What's going on? Nothing happened did it? Like, nothing, you know, monster involved or..."

"What? No," Jonathan chuckled, and then looked at Steve with abruptly narrowed eyes. "Why? Were you expecting something bad?"

"No, no, nothing like that," Steve replied immediately, staring down at a pile of doll heads shoved together on a corner of the girls' dresser. "Um, where'd Nancy get off to?"

"She and Vanessa are having some girl time. Nancy's probably just going to sleep here. She and Vanessa are trying to get in as much quality time as possible over the next few months."

"Man, that must suck for you huh?"

Steve looked up to find Byers' eyes on him, molten with something he didn't totally understand. He looked away.

"You don't have to do that," Jonathan said, and his voice was unexpectedly gentle.

"It's not a big deal."

Man, but Steve was telling a lot of lies tonight.

"You know I'm really sorry for how everything happened, right?"

Steve shifted his weight, looking away. He'd thought he'd come to the conclusion that he wanted absolutely nothing supernatural or dangerous happening tonight. But maybe a baby incident just to get him, like out of this room or house or town?

He could practically see Dustin rolling his eyes and Mike giving him one of those dark angry looks like 'What the hell is wrong with you? Are you that stupid?' Max and Lucas both suppressing laughter, the little smart ass dorks. Jane with her seriousness and understanding, nodding along like he made any kind of sense, like she was trying to figure out the big picture of how to make everything work to help as much as possible and hurt only a little.

And Will. Jonathan's little brother. He'd laugh a little with his friends but it would taper fast and his eyes would be off somewhere else, seeing things Steve didn't even want to think about, shoulders slumped just a little with something like hurt and resignation. And Jonathan, he'd be right there with Will, but more, worse. If he knew what Steve was thinking he'd be angry. It would be like a betrayal of both of them. Of all of them.

Fuck, he was dumb. There was no such thing as a small encounter with Upside Down forces. The Mind Flayer could come back just to get a souvenir mug or foam fucking finger and it would still be too much.

"So, look Steve..."

Jonathan cleared his throat again and sat gingerly on the edge of the bottom bunk. His eyes were latched onto the floor like he thought if he stared hard enough at it he could pull an Eleven and psionically open a gate into another dimension beneath him or some shit. As Steve surveyed him, Jonathan's hand spasmed pat-like on the floral comforter next to his left thigh, and Steve found himself laughing as he dropped onto the bed next to Byers.

"What's going on?" he asked when Jonathan didn't move to pick his speech back up and instead picked at some scrapes on his knuckles and examined his shoelaces.

Steve nudged against Jonathan only a little awkwardly, and Jonathan

looked over at him finally, the tug of a smile belied by the wariness in his eyes.

"I...had a thing to ask you. Or I guess, first I wanted to thank you again for everything you've done over the last year for Will. It's complicated because, well, Will is kind of my responsibility, but I haven't always been able to be there for him. I've actually... I've failed to be there for him when it really counted. And I try, um, really hard to make up for it, but well you've really helped him a lot. And it means... a lot to me to know he's also got you looking out for him. Especially since- well, since you know. Nancy. And things."

He paused and inhaled shakily, avoiding Steve's gaze. Steve swallowed hard. He'd been expecting some heaviness, because with Byers that seemed to be kind of his default mode, but Jesus. His first instinct was to crack some jokes about how very over Nancy Wheeler he was (he was really only like 90% of the way there but nobody else needed to know that) and then to make it clear as fuck that Jonathan hadn't failed Will or anyone (even though he didn't really know how true that was either). Steve held his breath for a count of five and went kind of another way.

Jonathan's head jerked up when Steve's hand landed on his shoulder, eyes narrowed suspiciously at first then widening into uncertainty. Steve ignored it.

"Look, Byers, for the record? Will is a great kid and he has been through more fucked up shit than basically any of us, other than maybe Jane. I'm happy to watch out for him, just like all the rest of their little losers' club. No offense, you know? And I don't know what makes you think you failed him, but I do know that he's really happy that you're doing more for yourself, like going for Nancy and going off to college. I think Will maybe thinks he holds you back or some shit, so the change has really been helping both of you. Just, uh, that's my two cents for whatever it's worth to you."

Steve withdrew his hand a little awkwardly from Byers' shoulder and watched with mounting horror as Jonathan scrubbed at his eyes, relief flooding him when he saw that they were red and a little shinier than usual but thankfully tear-free.

Jonathan smiled at him again, a genuine smile crooked with teeth and dimple and the threadbare glimmer of *something* warm and soft that was gone almost as soon as he saw it.

“These days I hear the going exchange rate on two cents from you is like a quarter,” Jonathan murmured, the ghost of a laugh rippling at the words.

Steve elbowed him, grinning despite himself at the flattery.

“Well that’s inflation for you,” he said wryly, and Jonathan laughed aloud, looking back over at Steve like he didn’t know quite what to make of him.

Good.

“So,” Steve said after a moment, watching Jonathan closely, “you said you wanted to say all that first. What was second?”

Jonathan shifted so he was reclining against the pink pillow behind him, head tilted back and eyes blank on the wooden slats above. Steve watched his adam’s apple bob, his chest rise and fall, and felt exhaustion wash over himself for a moment, the drape of it soft and itchy and beckoning. He’d been sleeping pretty poorly for a while now, restless with bizzaro nightmares and an impotent anger he had yet to decipher well enough to get rid of, but maybe it would be better here, in this narrow bed with pastels everywhere and a second person’s warmth to keep him company. He let the urge sit inside him for a full twenty seconds before shaking it away. He had a mission to think about, not to mention how weird it would be to fall asleep next to Jonathan frigging Byers.

Must be more tired than he’d thought.

“So?” he egged Jonathan on. “What’s the deal?”

“I wanted to give you my new phone number.”

Steve’s mind went blank with surprise, words coming mercifully of their own accord.

“Uh, okay. Cool. That’s probably good just in case.”

Jonathan picked up his head, looked at him, and then tilted it back to stare fathomless at the bottom of the mattress above them.

“I wanted to ask you to call me...”

Steve stared at Byers, disconcerted, while he paused to take in another deep breath.

“Once a week, I was hoping. Or every other if that’s what you’d, you know, be okay with.”

“Because you’ll miss me so much?” Steve couldn’t have kept the incredulity out of his voice if he’d tried- which he didn’t, because- what?

Jonathan cleared his throat. His face was red.

“I don’t trust Will to be honest with me,” he admitted quietly. “I was hoping you could keep me updated on things back here. The calls don’t have to be long or anything. We’ll both be busy and I know it’s asking a lot of you. I just, I need to know that I won’t be completely shut out when I’m not right here.”

Okay, that made sense. He was right about it being a pretty big favor, all things considered, but honestly Steve got it, and he found he didn’t mind the prospect a whole lot. If anything, it was almost like a relief. Another adult about the same age as him that he could talk through this shit with regularly? Knowing that Nancy being in Chicago and Jonathan in New York didn’t actually equate to him being left kind of without a peer in all this? Hell, yeah, it was Jonathan and they’d never really had to have actual conversations all that often, but... this could be good. This could be helpful for them both.

“Man, Byers, you had me thinking you were gonna ask me out or some shit,” Steve laughed, and Jonathan huffed out a chuckle of his own, only semi-strained.

“Only in your dreams, Harrington,” he said lowly, and Steve couldn’t resist a wicked grin.

“I’ll tell you what Byers. I’ll take you up on the phone dates, but

you'll have to listen to me talk through those sick dreams. You'll be taking a psych class at that fancy New York college, won't you?"

Jonathan snorted.

"One psych class wouldn't be enough for me to get you through that level of insanity," he mumbled back, then said more seriously, "I can't thank you enough doing this for me. I'll, uh, call you with the new number when I get it set up next week."

"Don't thank me yet," Steve ribbed, a hand rubbing at the back of his neck as he examined the bedspread underneath them. "I'll call to tell you Will is doing ok, and then keep you on the phone for thirty more minutes just ranting about the Hoosiers. Gotta make you work for your intel."

Jonathan shrugged, sitting up slowly.

"Work I'm used to," he replied, almost more to himself than to Steve. "Work I can handle."

What he couldn't handle went unsaid. The words didn't need to touch the air between he and Jonathan for Steve to know them as well as he knew the hum of the motor in his car or the sound of his own shouting.

Jonathan's hand touched Steve's knee, just barely grazing the denim there, and he gave it a single feather light squeeze before he pulled back, standing abruptly. Steve stood with him, trying not to look as out of sorts as he felt.

Their eyes met and Jonathan's darted away in the space of a heartbeat. He curled his shoulders down just a little defensively, hands shoving into pockets, and Steve remembered him in the high school parking lot- remembered a camera in pieces on the ground, remembered his tongue curling around innocuous words as if they were poison. In those moments, his mind had fought back against the lull of angry smog and dark tendriled fear with what he'd felt was a formidable blankness; so cavalier as to be nothing if not deadly, like the rattle on a snake. It had been (and was still) both intoxicating and terrifying to hold so much power. When he'd let himself feel it

that night, he'd ended up in front of his punching bag for hours until every part of him ached, thrumming with an adrenaline-borne contentment, the hum of lust like marrow in the bones of his hip, and the quiet wear beneath it all, the feeling of being just shy from completely wrung out.

Steve blew out a breath, slow and uneven. His diaphragm felt taut. It had been close to three years if he was remembering right and still the memory, like many lately, struck him viscerally. He tried to five-count through it and find whatever thought was at the eye of this particular storm.

He had to even the playing field or the phone calls he had just promised to make would turn out awkward as shit, full to the brim with stammering and throat clearing and asking Jonathan to repeat every other word mumbled too quietly for him to distinguish. If this was going to work for either of them, Steve felt compelled to show his own throat a little too, make it clearer that the tiny bit of trust still between them not only existed but had the capacity to grow.

"Come on, Byers," he heard himself saying, "you're leaving the state in like five days. Bring it in man."

Jonathan's brow furrowed in disbelief, his eyes wary on Steve's open arms.

"What are you, drunk?"

"Hey now," Steve retorted, giving Jonathan his most charming grin. "Come on. You can smell my breath if it makes you feel better."

Jonathan snorted and rolled his eyes, but he was smiling again now.

"I'll talk to you soon, Harrington. I'm going to go, see if I can get home before Will heads to bed."

"Man, come on. You're not leaving this state without at least giving me a firm handshake or something. After all we've been through together? We've got, you know, shared trauma and all that crap! We're both Nancy Wheeler survivors now, aren't we? That's gotta count for something, Byers."

Jonathan shook his head, huffing out laughter almost despite himself.

“Goodbye, Steve. I’ll call you in a week, ok? Saturday morning?”

“Cartoon time. Sounds like a plan.”

Jonathan almost walked past him then took a step back and allowed the right half of his body to press against Steve. Before he could jerk away, Steve turned in and brought an arm up around Jonathan’s shoulder, squeezing lightly and then thumping him twice on the back before retreating a half-step and letting Jonathan by, a half-hearted simper pulling at his lips.

Steve stood in the room alone for a minute after the door closed behind Byers, heart in his throat, head buzzing.

What was he forgetting?

Absently, Steve felt for the pocket of his trusty letterman, fingers closing in around a cool weight. He extracted the walkie-talkie, cursing under his breath, and checked the time.

He was only five minutes late to check in, but if he knew Dustin...

Steve opened the door a crack and peered each direction down the hallway. Music boomed through the house but Vanessa had, as per usual, done an impressive job gating off the upper level so that it was relegated to stragglers in need of the second bathroom or the select few she’d permitted access to the rest of the house. It was a four bedroom with a well sized office and finished basement, leaving plenty of space for the party insanity to take over without it invading the entire home. Across the way, Steve could hear the muffled murmur of voices from what he knew to be Vanessa’s room- Nance and Vanessa were still getting in some alone time, evidently- but he seemed to have this floor of the house otherwise to himself. Steve quietly shut the door once more, steeling himself against a surging of paranoia.

“Dustin. Come in. Over.”

Almost immediately Dustin’s voice crackled back to him, “What the hell happened? Where have you been? Over.”

Steve rolled his eyes, going to the window and scanning the street below.

“It’s like five minutes, asshole, not that big of a deal.”

When Dustin had been silent for a full minute, Steve scowled at his reflection, fingers coming up to pinch the bridge of his nose.

“You knew I was done, jackass. Over.”

“Well fuck you. Are you OK? Over.”

“Nothing happened,” Steve told him, a fist forming at his side. He released it slowly, taking a careful breath (in-hold-out) with each finger. “I’m sorry but unless you guys have something concrete, I think we have to call it for now. Over.”

“Well, we... I don’t know. Will was telling the truth about his dream. He was really freaked out. He was pretty sure something was going to go after his brother today. But Jonathan seemed fine to you? Over.”

“Yeah, he was fine. And Nancy is fine. I think, maybe, Will’s just still not doing well, you know? Maybe he needs a break from all the fantasy stuff you guys do. I mean, he does have the PTSD or whatever so his mind isn’t exactly...reliable all the time. Just don’t get too ahead of yourself again, alright Henderson? Over.”

“Maybe,” Dustin conceded quietly after a moment, static wrapping the word, “El’s going to keep watch a little more just in case though. Actually, unrelated, Steve, how have you been sleeping lately? Over.”

Steve shivered and pulled away from the window, looking back to the bunk beds behind him, one hand raising to rest on their ladder.

“Pretty much the same,” he found himself saying stiffly. “Why?”

“Oh, no reason! And you didn’t say ‘over’, dude. Over.”

Steve’s jaw clenched.

“Whatever, kid. Look, I’m calling it. I’m heading home. I’ve got a nine a.m. class tomorrow. You guys make sure you get to sleep, ok? Over.”

“You’ve got a nine a.m. class? But it’s summer now! Over.”

Steve scoffed.

“Yeah and final exams for college aren’t until next week. I’ll check in with you guys in a few days but seriously, I only want called in for emergencies until the semester ends, Henderson. Over and out.”

He heard the kid start grumbling over the channel at him and pushed the antenna down hard, fingers numb, asleep, where they curled around the walkie-talkie. Steve fought the impulse to throw the stupid thing at the wall as he shook out his hand, instead slipping it back into his pocket and pulling out his car keys, letting the metal press hard and solid and sharp into his palm. He was beyond done here, wanted nothing more than to get home and get to sleep. Maybe he was so fucking exhausted he’d crash his way into a decent rest-dreamless, maybe, or at least without nightmares.

When Steve got back home, he tossed off his shoes and promptly collapsed into the bed. Sleep came for him on the coattails of exhale, soft and warm and pastel, ugliness piled like severed Barbie heads in the corner, with eyes dead set and cold and unnoticed from where he sat. When he awoke after a solid eight hours, it was with a jolt, skin slick with chill, his heart racing. Steve tried to remember what had gone wrong, but the blur that came back to him was only molten right. Nevertheless, the goosebumps didn’t dissipate until his breakfast was dumped uneaten into his parents’ trash can, coagulating and cold.